

# The clock is ticking: Why standardized schedules don't work for learning

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Models that focus on learning and are not bound by traditional time barriers foster an immersive learning experience



In education, we talk a lot about equity, personalization, and meeting students where they are. But we often ignore one fundamental truth: Learning takes time, and the time needed is different for every student.

Ask any teacher, and they will tell you that the pace of learning is not universal. Some students grasp algebra in days, while others may need weeks. One student might master a new language with ease but struggle with scientific concepts. These differences are not deficits—they are human. And yet, our education system insists on treating time as the fixed variable in the equation of learning—even when we know better.

The structure of our schools revolves around standardized schedules: 180 days in a school year, 45 minutes for a lesson, five days a week. These schedules are rigid, designed not to maximize learning, but to maintain compliance with an [outdated factory model](#) that prioritizes memorization and recall over deep understanding and critical thinking. The result? Time becomes a barrier instead of a tool.

Students who learn quickly are held back; their progress is slowed to match the pace of the system. Those who need more time are rushed forward before they have grasped basic concepts, leading to gaps that grow over time. Teachers, caught in the middle, are forced to move on to the next lesson, even when the students in front of them have not fully mastered the last one.

This rigidity doesn't prepare students for the real world. In fact, it does the opposite.

Think about it: No one would suggest setting a standard time for other personal milestones. Imagine saying, “Everyone should learn to ride a bike in exactly two weeks,” or “You have three months to master playing the guitar.” It’s absurd. And yet, we impose these artificial deadlines on learning every single day.

Outside of school, success often depends on persistence, practice, and timing that matches individual needs. Whether you are mastering a skill for work, learning to cook, or training for a marathon, you adjust your pace based on progress—not the ticking of a clock.

So, what’s the alternative?

We need to flip the equation. Instead of fixing time and letting learning vary, we should fix the goal—proficiency—and let time vary. In this model, students move forward when they have demonstrated mastery of a skill or concept, not when the bell rings or the calendar flips to June.

Every state in the country allows schools to implement more flexible approaches to learning, but many [districts still struggle to embrace the benefits](#) of disrupting traditional learning. It is important to understand that this shift is not replacing whole-class instruction; instead, it is elevating it by nurturing student-led learning, helping to [improve proficiency in all subject areas](#).

From project-based activities that encourage students to apply their knowledge to real-world problems to digital learning platforms that create personalized learning paths, models that focus on learning and are not bound by traditional time barriers foster an immersive learning experience rather than an assembly-line approach to education. Ensuring students advance only when they have demonstrated mastery eliminates the gaps that conventional time-based models create. Skillful assessment practices help determine whether students have the foundational skills to move forward, and when they don’t, personalized interventions address learning needs before new content is introduced.

At [Eastern Hancock Schools](#), this systematic shift toward a focus on learning across all subject areas is a work in progress, requiring ongoing collaboration among educators, students, and families. However, elements of this type of system are already embedded in classrooms where learning naturally follows a performance-based progression. In courses like band, art, and performing arts, students refine their skills over time, receiving continuous feedback as they progress. The same applies to career and technical education (CTE) programs, where students build, create, and problem-solve at their own pace. Even in weightlifting classes, students track their individual performance, working to improve over time rather than meeting arbitrary benchmarks.

This approach is not just about fairness—it’s about unlocking potential. When students are given the time they need, they succeed. They build confidence, resilience, and a love for learning that can last a lifetime. Flexible models that shift

the focus to learning may still be evolving, but researchers have found solid evidence that its practices positively impact [learning dispositions](#), [skills](#) and [behaviors](#).

It is too complicated, some might argue, to push out traditional learning and let students move at their own pace. But what is more complicated: designing flexible systems that respect how humans actually learn or continuing to force a standardized system onto an unstandardized reality?

The truth is, the clock has been ticking on the factory model of education for decades. It's time to embrace a future where learning—not time—is the constant. Let's build a system that meets students where they are, gives them the time they need, and prepares them to thrive in a world where adaptability is the key to success.

Time may be precious, but learning is priceless. It is time we start treating it that way.